

Norms, Invariance, and Explanatory Relevance

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Descriptions of social norms can be explanatory. The erotetic approach to explanation provides a useful framework. I describe one very broad kind of explanation-seeking why-question, a genus that is common to the special sciences, and argue that descriptions of norms can serve as an answer to such why-questions. I draw upon Woodward's recent discussion of the explanatory role of generalizations with a significant degree of invariance. Descriptions of norms provide what is, in effect, a generalization regarding the kind of historically contingent system—a group or society, a generalization with a significant degree of invariance.

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1. OVERVIEW

I argue that descriptions of social norms can be explanatory. The erotetic approach to explanation provides a framework for my argument. However, the general erotetic approach (according to which explanations are simply answers to why-questions) provides only a framework for informative analyses of what is explanatory in a context; without the specification of its parameters, of the contextually appropriate relevance relation, it provides something short of an analysis. Accordingly, I here seek to describe one very broad kind of explanation-seeking why-question, a genus that is common to the special sciences, and to argue on that limited basis that descriptions of norms can serve as an answer to such why-questions. To this end, I draw upon Woodward's recent discussion of the explanatory role of generalizations with a significant degree of invariance. Within the erotetic approach, to see such generalizations as explanatory is, or amounts to, a diagnosis of a relevance relation. Descriptions of norms

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provide what is, in effect, a generalization regarding the kind of historically contingent system—a group or society. Such a generalization has a significant and interesting degree of invariance.

2. THE BASIC EROTETIC ACCOUNT

On the basic erotetic account, an explanation is an answer to a why-question, and can be understood in terms of the logic of why-questions. Why-questions may be analyzed in terms of triples consisting of a topic, a contrast class, and a relevance relation—specifying what would count as an answer (van Fraassen 1980; Henderson 1993, 2002; Risjord 1998, 2000). The topic specifies the event or state to be explained. The relevance relation is the sort of relation that an event or state must bear to the topical events or state (and not to other members of the contrast class) in order to qualify mention of it as an answer to the why-question. This much provides a schema for understanding explanation.

However, of itself, the basic erotetic schema is not a satisfying analysis of explanation. Until more is said about appropriate relevance relations, one has no real analysis of what is explanatory. Until the relevance relation is given some delimiting characterization, the general erotetic account just sketched stands ready to accommodate *any* event or state as an explanandum of *any* other state or event—anything yet goes. Hardly an illuminating result. Unless the parameters of the erotetic analysis are filled in appropriately, the “wrong things” go, and one has telling objections to one’s analysis.¹ The erotetic approach to explanation is only as good as the analyses that one can provide for specific classes of explanation-seeking why-questions—only as good as the *particular* analyses one provides.

Thus, illuminating erotetic analyses will need to analyze and thematize (classes of) relevance relations that *are* of interest and in play in *classes of contexts* and their associated explanation-seeking why-questions. Substantive analyses of erotetic explanations are, it seems, *not general analyses of explanation simpliciter—but are analyses of explanations-in-a-particular-kind-of-context*. An erotetic approach to

1. Kitcher and Salmon (1987; see also Salmon 1989, 141) noted that an erotetic analysis can be made to mimic the traditional covering-law analysis, with all its failings.

explanation that adopts a fully laissez-faire attitude towards the relevance relation then provides no analysis or substantive understanding of explanation,² while any substantive account will provide some delimiting specification of the relevance relation at issue.

Commonly, the relevance relation implicit in a why-question is at least partially a matter of the relation of cause and effect. One wishes to know of an event that causally favored the occurrence of the explanandum, rather than the other members of the contrast class. This is no less true of many explanation-seeking why-questions regarding actions. Somewhat more generally, questions having to do with why an action (or pattern of action) obtains have to do with *patterns of counterfactual dependence*. Such why-questions ask for the identification of an event or state on which the topic event or state (or pattern) is *dependent* in the sense that *had that event not occurred, the topic event (state or pattern) would at least have been less likely in the conditions that obtained* (where the other members of the contrast class are not likewise favored; see also Henderson 2002).

This partially characterizes a common relevance relation—marking out, at least crudely, what to count as explanatory in certain familiar or typical contexts. The contexts in question are not limited to scientific contexts, narrowly understood. Rather, the relevance relation is at issue in *most all why-questions having to do with why an action (or pattern of action) obtains—with why-questions and explanations encountered in “everyday” and historical contexts, as well as more systematically “scientific” (psychological, sociological, and so on) contexts*. Crude as my characterization is, it can have consequences for understanding the explanatory role of descriptions of norms. It invites elaboration in terms of recent work on invariant generalizations.

2. Here I seek to describe a broad class of explanation-seeking why-questions that readers should readily recognize. All constraints on the relevant relation explored here—indeed, all contextually salient relevance relations—are the situated product of one’s evolving or developing understanding of the world, how it operates, and the kinds of dependencies that it exhibits. That is, the why-questions that one asks are rightly informed by a posteriori understandings—thus, the constraints on why-questions are themselves a posteriori, not a priori, in character. The point is reflected in a recent exploration of a class of certain sociological why-questions and their situated character: Khalifa (2004) nicely reflects the principled empirical constraints on appropriate why-questions, and provides an admirable snapshot of a set of why-questions. I think of my own remarks here as a more partial exploration of a somewhat broader class of explanation-seeking contexts, and of a more generic set of why-questions.

3. INVARIANCE, WHAT-IF-THINGS-HAD-BEEN-DIFFERENT QUESTIONS, AND EXPLANATIONS

I here draw on Woodward's discussion of "Explanation and Invariance in the Special Sciences" (2000; and Woodward 2001). His leading ideas seem to me to capture something that is common to the special sciences—and something that we all demand in many action-explanations.

Woodward himself does not treat explanation in terms of why-questions, and he is largely concerned with the explanatory role of certain generalizations—those marked by an appropriate degree and kind of *invariance*. Still, it seems to me that his discussion may fruitfully be understood as characterizing a shared conception of a relevance relation that is in play in why-questions in both many everyday and scientific contexts. When understanding explanations as why-questions, one must not lose sight of the undeniable fact that certain kinds of generalizations commonly do feature in explanations, and that the mention of particular facts is sometimes explanatory against a background that supposes that a certain generalization holds. The character of the generalizations that are explanatory, or that serve as background understandings, reflects the relevance relations featured in the why-questions delimiting what counts as there explanatory. Attention to such generalizations is then revealing of the contextually salient why-questions and their relevance relations.

There is an additional reason for thinking about the explanatory role of some generalizations: my concern in this article is with the explanatory place of norms—or, rather, with *the explanatory place of descriptions of norms*. Descriptions of norms are *aptly understood as generalizations with appropriate degrees and kinds of invariance*.

A. Some Remarks on Norms

Norms—as I understand them—are dispositions to coordinated patterns of action and evaluation within some group of people. To characterize a people as having such-and-such a norm is to characterize a pattern of action exhibited in the "fitting circumstances," and to say that members of the group have dispositions to conform to such a pattern and to evaluate action (or actors) with respect to its conformity. To say that there is a norm of avoiding eye contact between strangers in a certain large city is to say that folk there typically do not make eye contact with people they do not recognize and with whom

they do not have business, *and* that, *ceteris paribus*, they act as though such eye contact is generally bad—perhaps impolite or intrusive, and perhaps a symptom of mental illness, rural hick-icity, or various other moral or psychological failings. For much of American history, there is said to have been a norm in the American South requiring males of African descent not to stare at white women; this is to say that most African American males did not stare at white women (at least not overtly), and that their behavior was monitored for its conformity, sanctioned for not conforming, and so on. Again, one is saying more than that there happened to be a pattern in folk's actions—one is saying something about the dispositions of folk in the relevant social context, and one is saying something about how, typically, they *would* act and react were they in certain situations. One is not saying anything about whether the conforming actions were “really” good. One is not embracing as one's own the evaluations to which the folk are disposed. One can believe that the norms described are themselves bad (Henderson 1993, 2002).

Norms, in the sense just mentioned, cannot serve as answers to why-questions. They cannot serve as erotetic explanations. Within the erotetic account, explanations are answers to questions—they are linguistic things: sentences, or utterances (tokings of sentences). Norms simply do not qualify. *Descriptions* of norms *do*, however, qualify as the sort of thing that can serve as an answer to a question (Henderson 2002).

The way I here understand the term *norm* is not at all idiosyncratic or unusual. However, there are other associations and ways of thinking of norms that must be kept distinct.

First, while the norms that I am concerned with involve dispositions to evaluative stances on the part of members of a group, these social norms are not normative in one respect that some associate with talk of norms: the kind of social norm in question here need not make for the objective correctness or appropriateness of the actions that conform. To appreciate the contrast intended here, think of how some would talk of “the norms of rationality.” Whatever is typically intended in such talk, this much is clear: (1) a people can have norms regarding how to reason—tendencies to reason in certain ways and to evaluate reasoning accordingly—which do not conform to what is envisioned in talk of “*the* norms of rationality”; and (2) “the norms of rationality” are then subject to discovery as somehow and somewhat independent of how we, or any people, are presently (or at any given time) disposed to reason and evaluate reasoning.

Second, there is a closely related point to be made about one recent account of norms that combines something like social norms as understood here with the idea of norms as constituters of what is correct. Brandom, in *Making It Explicit* (1994), envisions something that might be termed a *correctness constituting norm*—something that involves social norms *and something more*. He writes of social norms *with special features* that somehow constitute what is correct with respect to what the norm governs.³ I doubt that there are such correctness-constituting norms, but *were* there any, these would be a special class of dispositions to action and evaluation that somehow provide for the correctability of present dispositions—fixing on what is correct even while the contemporary social norms may yet fix on something that is incorrect. As Brandom tells the story, what I have been calling norms—the dispositions within a group at a time—may be somehow a component (or perhaps time slice) of these correctness-constituting norms. But this much seems clear: social norms as I am concerned with them here—the patterns of coordinated dispositions to action and evaluation at a time—do not of themselves have what it takes to constitute what is correct.⁴ The actions or thoughts to which they give rise can be uniformly wrong. However, the supposed correctness-constituting norms must then not control or account for what is done at a time—for it may dictate an action or thought quite other than what is undertaken, even uniformly undertaken. So far as I can see, Brandom's norms must be some kind of Hegelian construction over sequences of social norms. For me, this is a useful way of putting the matter, for it leads to this conclusion: Brandom's norms do not have the here-and-now locality that seems needed to account for why an action was undertaken, or why something is thought. The explanation of why something was thought or done by some individual or

3. This correctness-constituting role of Brandom's full-blown norms is particularly in evidence in those envisioned norms for the use of a concept or term. These linguistic/conceptual norms are said to fix the correct application of the term or concept, to fix its extension, and provide for the correction of passing applications, even those that are uniformly matters of considered agreement within a linguistic community at a time. On such an account, the norms for concepts such as *rationality*, *truth*, or *justice* would then seem to be paradigmatic correctness-constituting norms.

4. Karsten Stueber (this issue) writes of rules determining what is appropriate to do, and of a grasp of others' rules allowing us to appreciate the rationality of those following the rule. This suggests that he is concerned to correctness-constituting norms in something like Brandom's sense, and Wittgenstein and Winch, with whom he wants to agree, do seem to have something like this in mind in their talk of rules. But this might be a misreading reading of what he has in mind.

group may turn on a description of the then-and-there social norms of the relevant group, or so I argue in this article, but not on the envisioned, yet to be unfolded, Brandomian norms.⁵

Third, much talk of norms shades over into talk of “rules”—and talk of rules is itself diverse.

On one hand, Wittgenstein, Winch, and many neo-Wittgensteinians write of rules in ways that are related to (indeed inform) Brandom’s use of “norms”—as social norms that also have whatever additional it is that constitutes what is correct to say. I will then let my earlier remarks serve to distinguish norms (as I understand them) from such rules.

On the other hand, given the philosophical currency of computational cognitive science, much contemporary discussion of “rules” has to do with computational algorithms. Talk of rules commonly is of a piece with the idea that one who follows a rule, runs a program. This requires that the one who follows a rule has a set of rule-like representations instructing the agent (or some subagential component) what to do in what conditions. To “run the program,” those representations must be causally at work in the production of actions or beliefs in the indicated conditions. Ultimately, the causal efficacy of these rules (and of additional representations carrying various pieces of information) is understood as a matter of the causal efficacy of their syntax. The suggestion is then that to be able to describe a norm one should be able to specify a program that the relevant agents are running. But I want no part of this suggestion. Of course, for there to be norms in my sense—coordinated dispositions to action or thought, and to evaluation—agents must have learned something. But there need be no suggestion that this learning was a matter of acquiring or internalizing a tractably computable algorithm. To talk of norms in my sense does not entail commitment to computational cognitive science. Perhaps something more in line with connectionism holds the key to understanding many of the capacities that humans have for complying with social norms.⁶

Descriptions of norms are, in effect, generalizations regarding a group’s coordinated dispositions to action and evaluative stance-taking. Thus, to think of descriptions of norms as having a place in expla-

5. My misgivings here are related to misgivings regarding the causal role of so-called wide content.

6. On this point, it is clear that Stueber (this issue) and I are in substantial agreement—and much of his piece is devoted to misgivings regarding the computational conception of rules.

nation (erotetic explanation) is to think of a place for certain sorts of generalizations within explanation.

B. Woodward's Conception of Explanations and Invariant Generalizations

Woodward is concerned to articulate the features of certain generalizations in virtue of which those generalizations can foster explanations and serve as themselves explanatory. Still, his discussion may be taken as informing us about a sort of relevance relation. When some sentence is explanatory, this is because (1) there is an explanation-seeking why-question recognizable in a context of concern, (2) that question features a contextually understood relevance relation, and (3) the explanatory sentence serves to fix on something that bears that relevance relation to the topic of the why-question. So, a class of explanatory generalizations corresponds to a kind of relevance relation featured in a class of explanation-seeking why-question. These (the relevance relation and the explanatory generalization) are two sides of the same explanatory coin.

The essentials (for my purposes) of Woodward's account are as follows.

First, the generalizations that support the prominent class of explanations are those that would allow us to answer a range of what Woodward terms "what-if-things-had-been-different questions." This is to say that not only can an appropriate generalization be used in connection with information about initial conditions to show the explanandum was to be expected,⁷ but it can also provide an understanding of how the explanandum variable would be different were the explanan variables to take a range of different values. Appropriately, explanatory generalizations allow one to place the explanandum, *and its various contrasts*, within a pattern of counterfactual dependencies.

Second, whether a generalization can be used to explain has to do with whether it is *invariant rather than with whether it is lawful* (as nomicity is judged using traditional measures). An *invariant generalization* describing a relationship between two or more variables is *invariant if it would continue to hold—would remain stable or unchanged—*

7. One must also accommodate the explanation of improbable events (see Henderson 1993; Humphreys 1989).

as various other conditions change as the result of interventions.⁸ The set or range of changes over which a relationship is invariant is its *domain of invariance*.

One can distinguish two sorts of changes that are relevant when thinking of invariance:

1. Changes “that we would intuitively regard as the background conditions to some generalization—changes that affect other variables besides those that figure in the generalization itself” (Woodward 2000, 205)
2. Changes in those variables that figure explicitly in the generalization itself

“For a generalization to count as invariant, there must be some interventions . . . for variables figuring in the relationship for which it is invariant” (Woodward 2000, 206). This does not require that it is invariant across all such changes. The ideal gas law, $PV = nRT$, is famously invariant only under some range of interventions on temperature, for example. Invariance is a matter of degree—as a generalization may hold under a more or less wide range of interventions.

How Invariant Generalizations May Be Explanatory as Answers to Why-Questions or in Fixing on Such Answers

Special sciences commonly study organized systems that result from historical contingencies—for example, a biologist might study the functional organization shared by a class of organisms resulting from the notoriously contingent course of evolution. Anthropologists may study the conventional norms of some group. Economists may study the relations among variables such as unemployment, money

8. The idea of an invariant generalization turns on the idea of an intervention. The idea of an intervention involves an idealization of an experimental situation—but one that need not be done by humans or planned:

[A]n intervention on some variable X with respect to some second variable Y is a causal process that changes X in some appropriately exogenous way, so that if a change in Y occurs, it occurs only in virtue of the change in X , and not as a result of some other set of causal factors. (Woodward 2000, 200)

One must acknowledge that this makes for significant (but not insurmountable) epistemological challenges when seeking to establish (with reasonable confidence) invariant generalizations in domains where experimentation is commonly impossible.

supply, and inflation, within a kind of historically contingent social system. These subjects have to do with regularities—physiological or sociological—that are (in some recognizable sense) the result of historical (or prehistorical) contingencies. Such regularities are dependent on background conditions, as certain changes in those conditions would destroy or markedly modify the systems and make for violations in the regularities uncovered. However, some significant ranges of changes in background conditions would not lead to such breakdowns—and thus, within limits, the systems and regularities have a degree of stability. As a result, we have an interesting and stable subject for study. Various social scientific disciplines and subdisciplines grow up to study such systems.

Suppose that work in one such special science yields a generalization describing how one or more variables of interest are related within systems of the sort there studied. The generalization holds for some significant range of values these variables may take—given a background that is stable and characteristic of the subject matter of the discipline. For example, the generalization may describe the interrelated working of the system of organs making for blood-sugar homeostasis. Or it may describe historically accepted and evaluatively enforced ways in which a people are regulated within a society, as in the norms of Jim Crow. There may well be some interventions on the variables there featured for which the generalization breaks down, perhaps along with the system. But the generalization holds good for a significant range of interventions.

As discussed earlier, to answer a why-question, one must provide an understanding of how antecedent events or states bore some understood relevance relation to the topic, as opposed to the other members of the contrast class. As also suggested earlier, in the sort of why-question typically asked when asking why some action was done, or why some pattern of action is found, one wants the perspicuous identification of a state or event on which the topic is counterfactually dependent. More fully, one demands that the antecedent event or state be identified in terms that allow one to understand why the topic, rather than its contrasts, obtained by locating them in a pattern of counterfactual dependencies involving antecedents. Given the terms in which the topic is characterized, there are understood alternatives, and a successful explanation will point to an antecedent (or antecedents) that, were it (or they) not to have obtained, the topic would not have obtained (or would have been less likely to), and, given the obvious alternatives to the antecedent event

pointed to, various alternative members of the contrast class would have obtained (rather than the topic) or would have been more likely. Invariant generalizations seem just the ticket. Against the background of stability of the systems at issue, they deliver an appreciation of how things would have been different were things to have been different with respect to certain variables mentioned in those generalizations. They sponsor an appreciation of the patterns of counterfactual dependencies called for. They provide for the identification of an explanation by informing us of general patterns of counterfactual dependencies characterizing a kind of system—one commonly encountered and stable by virtue of certain background conditions. Facts about the case allow us to then recognize that certain antecedents fit into the general pattern by giving rise to the topic in preference to the other members of the contrast class.

4. ASSEMBLING THE PIECES: DESCRIPTIONS OF NORMS AS EXPLANATORY GENERALIZATIONS WITH SIGNIFICANT INVARIANCE

Norms are dispositions to coordinated patterns of action and evaluation within some group of people. The group, their situation in a physical and social context, and their norms are contingent. Nevertheless, the group (or groups) and the norms embraced display some measure of stability—a kind of stability that is exhibited by many of the sorts of systems studied in the special sciences: a kind of stability that is dependent on a range of background conditions that may well not always obtain. Nevertheless, for some historical period, the background conditions and the systems do (or did) obtain. As a result, certain regularities in action and dispositions obtain. The regularities are not merely in some pattern of occurrent action or events. Rather, the regularities have a kind of invariance: generalizations characterizing them are invariant across some range of possible interventions. They reflect patterns of *counterfactual dependency*.

A common sort of why-question asks for the identification of antecedent events or states on which the topic is counterfactually dependent—asks for the identification of antecedents such that were that antecedent not to have obtained, the topic would not have obtained, or would have been less likely, and such that alternatives to the antecedent would have favored instead the other members of the contrast class. Clearly, invariant generalizations provide just the sort of infor-

mation about patterns of counterfactual dependencies that seems called for in answering such why-questions.

So, one is led to recognize a kind of subject matter characteristic of the special sciences—contingent systems (which nevertheless may for us be quite pervasive). One is also led to recognize a kind of generalization that describes such systems: generalizations with imperfect, but significant, invariance. One also comes to appreciate a kind of why-question important in many special sciences, and how generalizations of the sort just identified can be important in answering them.⁹ Within the erotetic approach to explanation, this provides a somewhat generic account of an important class of explanations.

Why-questions having to do with actions of an individual or group of individuals—those typically asked when asking, “why the agent did such and such” or “why those folk do such and such”—are examples of why-questions of the sort identified as prominent in the special sciences. As we have seen, invariant generalizations give the resources for answering such questions, and sometimes serve as answers themselves. Suppose, for example, that it is a norm among adolescent males in a given community not to show deference to males in positions of authority. Suppose that the norm is strong, and that the preponderance of young males conforms. Then suppose that several adolescent males are stopped in the hall of a public school and asked a question regarding their plans to attend an event that afternoon. Each gives highly casual and somewhat disrespectful answers. Suppose also that these young men have no particular special dislike for the person who has stopped them. When asked why they respond

9. I have been concerned to understand how a description or representation of norms can be understood as a kind of invariant generalization, and how that can be, or help one identify, an answer to a prominent form of why-question about actions. This is not to return to the (venerable but now discredited) understanding of explanations as arguments. My concern has been with how information about norms can provide erotetic explanation. I do not suppose that this information need be employed in an argument. It might be employed in something more like simulation. I regard the theory-theory versus simulation-theory debate as largely a debate about how we make use of explanatory information, rather than a debate about what makes for explanation—these approaches suggest complementary epistemic ways of making use of what is known about people and peoples (Henderson 1996; Henderson and Horgan 2000). My concern here has been with one very important respect in which information about norms can be relevant to erotetic explanations of a readily recognizable sort. I would think that the points made here are open to both simulationist and theory-theorist treatments of how we, as cognitive systems, draw on and employ such information to fix upon answers to the sorts of why-question here discussed.

as they do, a good answer might characterize the norm. Each is a member of a community in which there are dispositions to avoid displays of respect to authorities and to punish displays of respect, and each of these young men has learned or acquired the norm. With this information one can see that, had a fellow student asked them of their plans, they would have given answers very different in tone. Had a different authority figure inquired, perhaps another teacher, an administrator, or a security guard, they would have given a similar response.

To characterize a norm is to characterize coordinated dispositions to action or thought, and to evaluation, within a group. Of course, for the actions of some particular set of people to be explicable by reference to that norm, those people must have become a member of the group in this sense—they must have acquired that norm, which is to say that each of them must have acquired the relevant pattern of dispositions. When we explain the actions of a set of people (or of an individual) by reference to the norms of “their group,” there is always the supposition that the social level regularity in question is paralleled in the dispositions of these “members” of that group. This does not require that members of the group have articulate representations of their norms, or could produce such. It does not require that the dispositions in question result from internalized rules in the computationalist sense. It requires only that the dispositions be realized in them, and leaves open the cognitive mechanisms by which this is done. Perhaps it is a norm governing casual conversation between nonintimates within a society to maintain an interpersonal separation of approximately 0.75 meters. Now suppose that two acquaintances are engaged in a conversation on a busy sidewalk. They are constantly readjusting their positions; as the one is forced to move to make room for a passerby, the other makes corresponding adjustments, or the first returns to the original position. The individual adjustments may each be explained in terms of the norm (that they each “possess”). Perhaps, the two end up being in positions against the wall or window of the buildings. Here they need not make further changes in position to accommodate passersby and maintain their speaking distance with a minimum of distraction. While the norm features in the explanation, there is no suggestion that they explicitly or subdoxastically represent the norm to themselves—no suggestion that somewhere in their “program” they possess some sentence in the “language of thought” representing or expressing their rule for speaking distance.

Finally, we can think of a case in which the norms may or may not be those of the people whose action is explained. Think of how descriptions of the segregationist norms of the Jim Crow American South can allow us to answer a question—for example (regarding some occasion in the 1950s), “Why did the members of the United Temple AME Zion Church of Birmingham, Alabama, congregate in the rear of the city bus?” Against the background of a generalization describing the norms of the region, it becomes explanatory to note that the church in question is an African American church. If one did not know of these norms, their description would be found explanatory. In each case, what is explanatory is information that allows one to put states and events into a pattern of counterfactual dependencies.

But here the explanation may take one of two forms—depending on the facts of the case. First, and less plausibly, the church members may have internalized the norms as their own—in which case, they have a disposition to sit in the back of public transportation as their “proper place” and to negatively evaluate African Americans who do not sit in their “proper place.” In this case, characterizing the norms of Jim Crow (which are here “their norms” as well) would be explanatory in the direct way already discussed. Alternatively, and more plausibly, the church members may understand the norms as largely the norms of others. However, to the extent that these others are known to have significant power to punish failures to conform, it becomes prudent for the church members to sit in the back.

The point of this article has been to develop an understanding of an explanatory role for descriptions of norms (what is sometimes written of as an “explanatory role for norms”). I believe that most explanatory uses of descriptions of norms can be understood along the lines sketched here. I should perhaps add that I do not believe that the social sciences are largely devoted to producing such explanations. Indeed, it may well be more common for the social sciences to be devoted to matters such as the explanation of norms—how particular patterns of dispositions to action and evaluation come to be. Of course, in addressing such issues, the special sciences, as special sciences, will typically need to have appeal to yet further invariant generalizations.

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